

On the conduct of sociological warfare: a reply to the special section on *Economy of Force*¹

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It is an honour to receive commentaries on *Economy of Force* from these four distinguished scholars. I am grateful to Tarak Barkawi, Patchen Markell, Julian Go, and Vivienne Jabri for devoting precious scholarly time to this book.

Economy of Force is not about the ‘economics of war’, or not in any straightforward sense. Rather it retrieves the older, but surprisingly neglected, history and theory of *oikonomia*, ancient Greek for household governance. The book is a study of *oikonomia* in the use of military force, but also as underlying distinctly social forms of governance more broadly. There is a very long tradition of thinking about households-as-government and a great deal of scholarship in literary and gender studies on practices and ideologies of domesticity. *Oikonomia* is the origin of the language of modern ‘economics’, but more importantly and revealingly almost all writing about government in the West. International and much political theory is out of touch with these literatures resulting in blindness to a crucial reality about modern governance forms. The large-scale household administration of life processes plays a remarkably central role in international and imperial relations. *Economy of Force* illustrates this through a history of so-called ‘armed social work’ in counterinsurgency, beginning with late-nineteenth-century French and American colonial pacification and then detailed case studies of two late-colonial British emergencies in Malaya and Kenya, US counterinsurgency in Vietnam, and US-led multinational campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq. In each case, to varying degrees and in different ways, the civilian base of armed resistance was weakened through the forcible removal and mass concentration of civilians; the selective delivery and withholding of humanitarian supplies; the empowering of local collaborators to rule ‘their population’; detention without trial and exemplary massacres; and the opening of markets and new schools. If insurgents and counterinsurgents are in a competition in government, then what is the nature of government under counterinsurgency rule? Through violence and control over life, through the management of gendered and racialised bodies in their extreme and irreducible vulnerability, counterinsurgents were seeking to create units of rule in which populations could be domesticated. That is, they drew on and innovated different forms of household management.

Patchen Markell has written an elegant and generous essay on *Economy of Force*. Among the many insightful observations, perhaps the most challenging is his recounting of the complex history, ambiguities, and political stakes in the concept of homology. Initially drawn to talk of a ‘domestic homology’ for rhetorical reasons - to emphasise the far deeper significance of domesticity and households to an international theory audience over-familiar with, even jaded by, ‘domestic analogies’ - the expression actually pointed to a more profound insight. The rise of the modern social realm from the late eighteenth-century did not displace household rule; it was itself a form of this oldest art and science

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of government. Modern government administration - local, national, imperial - was not merely analogous to 'social housekeeping'. To the extent that populations in modern society continued to be governed through the administration of life processes, it was actually a *form* of household rule. In general agreement with the central claims and intent of the book, Markell nonetheless raises a vital question about the basis of the claimed homology between household forms. Returning to the original mid-nineteenth century debate in biology, he suggests two possibilities. Either the likeness is 'archetypal' in which the essential traits of household management are extrapolated from one particular instance; later household forms would then be said to either fit or diverge from the archetype. Or the likeness could be genealogical, with the task to trace the lines of historical and theoretical descent from earlier household forms to the modern social realm, and practices of counterinsurgency, without *necessarily* needing to claim that modern society itself *is* a household.

I am grateful for this prompt to more clearly articulate the basis of the claimed homology, which is neither archetypal nor only genealogical. Clearly much so-called Western 'political' language and thought descends from ancient thinking about the *oikos*, but also *domus* (Latin for house), that is, domestication and de-politicization. As Markell writes, there are important continuities 'in discourses *about* households, ways of representing the nature of household life and making it meaningful whose transmission across time and space can be charted'. As Vivienne Jabri also notes, 'the governmental state... draw[s] upon a discursive and institutional legacy that stemmed in various forms of household'; liberalism's 'imperative to "domesticate"' derives 'from understandings of household management'; there are actions 'that render household as a category of practice'; and powerful actors use 'the language of the domestic realm as a mode of legitimation'. However, the ancient Greek *oikos* itself, of course, is not the progenitor of actual, really existing modern forms of household. To say that 'armed social work' is a form of *oikonomia* in the use of force is not to say that the *oikos* is an unrecognised ancestor of modern forms of social regulation for there is no archetypal household. Rather it is to retrieve a powerful framework to convey the historical persistence of governance based on the ministration of life processes. This is the homological bond connecting practices that are so historically variable: the *human experience* of biological necessity and stubborn, contingent, but never wholly successful attempts to domesticate people through the administration and control of life necessities.

This central basis of household governance is missing from Tarak Barkawi's typically incisive reading, which allows me to clarify an important distinction not stated clearly enough in the book. Given the pervasiveness of modern liberalism and social theories, all of which are based on the premise of the destruction of large-scale forms of household governance, there was a need to uncover the earlier history of households and its continuing legacy in seemingly post-household (that is, social) thought. This accounts for the book's extensive discussion of genealogies of household governance in the history of thought. Barkawi interprets this as the *basis* of the ontological claim that the modern social realm is a scaled-up and transformed household, thus reducing *Economy of Force* to analyses of 'texts' and discourse. This would indeed be a powerful criticism if the claim regarding the continuing reality of household governance rested on a genealogy of thought. But instead it rests on a demonstration of the persistence of the hierarchical administration of life processes in modern capitalist and imperial society through

historical analysis of capitalism, imperialism, states, and social policy. To be sure, as Markell notes, while sociocratic government can be traced back to earlier household forms, this does not *necessarily* signify that the household form *itself* is continuous. This is where Markell sits, aligning this position with Hannah Arendt.² Anything more, he suggests, risks diminishing ‘the nature and extent of the transformations in household rule that are involved in the modern “rise of the social”’, the intermediary between capitalism and state power. However, there are good grounds for claiming that this is exactly what persists - ontologically - not just genealogically: units of rule in which populations are domesticated through administering life necessities. For if there is no claim to an archetypal homology, then the dangers of underestimating the degree of transformations in household rule in modern society are diminished. The question is whether the historical account is convincing; whether I have successfully marked the distinctive traits of the modern social realm while also demonstrating the continuities with older household forms; whether I can show that modern capitalist, imperial society failed to liberate the management of life processes from household despotism.

As continually demonstrated in fields outside IR, to do something other than historical sociology is not to forgo historical research. Hence, Barkawi is hopefully right that there is nothing in *Economy of Force* ‘that looks like a historical *sociology* of household rule or warfare’ (emphasis added). That was deliberate; the book is a theoretically informed history that eschews casual and ahistorical references to ‘social processes’, ‘social structures’, ‘social forces’, and so on. This necessitated drawing on a wide range of approaches and fields, as well as writing in quite different registers combining histories and critiques of social and political thought and large-scale historical analysis of some of the major institutions of modernity with empirical analyses of counterinsurgency campaigns and accompanying texts. While each of them in different ways and for different reasons obscured modern household governance, the broader writings of ‘social’ thinkers such Marx, Weber, Habermas and others were obviously not off-limits in this task, nor were works by later social scientists. How could they be? *Economy of Force* is a study of one key feature of modernity, which is necessarily related to but does not *seek* to subvert Marx on capitalism or Weber on bureaucracy. But these thinkers were not sufficient on their own. The book drew equally, if not more, from humanities scholarship, especially history, literary, feminist, gender and postcolonial studies. The point was not, as Barkawi fears, to supplant one totalising project with another. In contrast, Markell saw a ‘re-narration’, a ‘recasting’ of the rise of states, capitalism, and empires in a large-scale but not totalising history and theory of households.

Similarly, the grounds for conceiving counterinsurgency practices as *oikonomia* in the use of force are far wider than Barkawi suggests, in a ‘hidden discourse of household politics [sic] in the texts of social theorists and counterinsurgents’. They are in longstanding and well-documented historical practices of administering local populations in these wars, the forcible removal and concentration; food denial and control of humanitarian supplies; funding and arming of local despots, deaths squads and militia;

² This is ambiguous. Though *Economy of Force* does not depend on the precise nature of Arendt’s claim, she came very close saying that society is more than just analogous to a household, writing of ‘the reality of a national household’ and ‘the rise of society’ as ‘the rise of the “household” (*oikia*) or of economic activities to the public realm’ (1958: 33, 44).

highly gendered and racialised attempts at liberal improvement; house raids, torture, and mass detentions. But how does rereading such practices as household administration ‘challenge other scholarship’ on counterinsurgency (Barkawi)? As discussed at length in the Introduction, albeit not in the case studies, the three currently dominant theories of counterinsurgency rule are unconvincing in the light of the historical rise of the social realm (21-39). Political realism does not provide a convincing analysis of the nature of counterinsurgency, but repeats the stated objectives of counterinsurgency states because it is itself a historically specific paradigm of social regulation (25-27, 69-76). Liberal solidarism and structural functionalism obscure the way counterinsurgencies are actually fought and how, if at all, victory is achieved. They too are best situated within the violent transformation of the social realm (27-32, 76-84). Followers of Foucault rightly emphasize, rather than obscure, the coercive character of armed social work (32-37). However, an essential part of Foucault’s own story about the ‘discovery of population’ rests on a false premise, specifically his characterization of the underlying model that was supposedly (but had not) been eliminated: households (69-84, 109-11).

Counterinsurgency practitioners interpreted and justified what they were doing as a form of sociological warfare. They also repeatedly turned to social theory to explain the *causes* of revolts. The purpose of analysing such accounts, which were variously rooted in political realism, liberal solidarism, constructivism, and structural functionalism, was certainly not because they determined the conduct of actual wars. It was not any social theory that shaped the kind and degree of pacification across each case, but the exigencies of war itself and the logics of household governance. Thus the book does *not* claim that military commanders based ‘their campaigns upon social thought’, which leading sociologist Julian Go suggests is ‘the most fundamental claim in the book’. It repeatedly states the opposite (24-5, 43, 248). Barkawi’s example of ‘slippage’ between genealogy and ontology is not a counterinsurgency case, but a brief account of the 1857 Sepoy Revolt (i.e. there was no attempt to present it as an historical event). Taken out of context, a literal reading of one line does give the false impression that utilitarian ideas caused the revolt. However, read in context this was clearly a charge made by conservative critics of utilitarianism, not me. So why analyze accompanying social theories if they had so little effect on counterinsurgency conduct? It was to highlight their common place in the history of *oikonomia*. The claim does not require specific social theories to have an independent impact on military campaigns let alone actual sociologists directing military strategy, the smoking gun that Go demands in a spirited defence of his field. Indeed, it was French army officer David Galula, the most influential propagandist of ‘armed social work’, who referred to pacification as ‘the conduct of sociological warfare’. This was not because its practitioners were sociology graduates. Rather he rightly perceived pacification war and sociology as primarily concerned with the administration of insurgent populations. This is not a functionalist argument, as Go suggests to illustrate, tautologically, the impossibility of escaping ‘social’ explanation. The social realm did not emerge in the eighteenth-century ‘to serve the needs of elites repressing revolt’ (Go). Its emergence as the intermediary between capitalism and imperial state power provided new means of pacification. By the nineteenth-century social forms of regulation expanded in response to the revolutionary effects of industrial, democratic, and anti-colonial revolts. As Markell’s reading of homology suggests, particular hierarchical relations between people based on experiences of bodily and other

necessities may have a deep-rooted likeness that we may name, historicise and theorise without resorting to sociological functionalism.

Economy of Force could and perhaps should have said more on the relationship between ideology and counterinsurgency practice. But it is only by tautology and definitional fiat that this would constitute ‘social’ explanation, as Barkawi suggests. However, I am surely responsible for not explicitly stating that it was only a rumor that the British in India greased cartridges with the fat of beef and pork, thus perpetuating an Orientalist stereotype. But, again, that rumors have effects and dynamics, including stigmatization, was understood centuries before they were repackaged as ‘social’ concepts. Nonetheless, the stereotype was a mistake, and a troubling one given the significant danger, well highlighted by Julian Go, of downplaying subaltern agency by focusing primarily on counterinsurgency. Without doubt, this was the most challenging dilemma of writing a book of this kind. The not wholly satisfactory solution was to include examples of local resistance across each of the cases and repeatedly emphasise, demonstrating as far as possible, the conceptual claim that household governance is always co-constituted by resistance to it. More generally, given everything else on colonial and other revolts, it is difficult to sustain the claim that the book ‘says nothing about the agency of insurgents themselves’ (Go) or that the *causes* of revolts are reduced to a ‘theoretic system’ (Barkawi). On the contrary, as explicitly stated, ‘It did not require any social theory for workers to observe and understand the clear gap between the founding ideals of the democratic revolutions... and the realities of industrial life. Similarly, no social explanation for the Indian Rebellion was needed to explain the collective decision of a group of Sepoys to “mutiny”’ (67).

The Committee to Enquire into the Sociological Causes and Remedies for Mau Mau did not need a sociology PhD because the beginnings, significance, and utility of distinctly social modes of thought precede and exceed sociology as the scientific ‘study of society’. The modern concepts of economy, culture, civil society, psychology, the social, and the political emerged out of a new set of ideological distinctions and practices attendant the modern rise of the social realm itself. Unsurprisingly, this is replicated in counterinsurgency practices and texts. In the total ‘social revolutions’ they violently enacted, counterinsurgents did not fetishize practical fields or disciplinary distinctions, which is why social anthropologists, social psychologists, and economists all played a legitimating role. The book focuses more on sociology due to its privileged position as keeper of the canon of classical social thought and because few in international theory question the validity or historicity of social and sociological theory; there are only debates about its different forms (Owens, 2015b). Go rightly points to the plurality of social theory in IR. *Economy of Force* does not ignore that. Rather it shows that *in spite* of its diversity social theory has obscured the household ontology of the modern social realm and is unable to properly theorise politics. It is therefore surprising that Go claims the book is ‘not really about social theory’, but only one of its forms, that every reference to ‘social theories’ should be replaced with ‘structural functionalist social theory’ (Go). There is lengthy analysis of the earliest philosophies of sociability; enlightenment theorists of bourgeois civil society; Lockean ‘societal’ and nineteenth-century ‘social’ liberalism; political realism, Marxism, structural functionalism, and sociological readings of Foucault. These diverse theories are not all tarred with the same brush; each is subjected to its own singular critique and historicization.

The social sciences are increasingly comfortable with the effort to provincialize social thought. However, to date, there has been greater resistance to fully historicise social categories and concepts. Julian Go is certainly right that to historicise is not a panacea for political and intellectual problems. But in some instances, to provincialize, theorise, and historicise can lead to casting off intellectual crutches, no matter how invested in them we may be. For it was not by the ‘social concept’ *as such* that Du Bois and Fanon showed that ‘race’ is not a biological truth, but an understanding, among other things, of the secular relational constitution of white supremacy. To understand how and why such a general understanding advanced under the label of ‘social’ theory requires historical and conceptual analysis of the universalizing impulses of capitalism and empire. It is simply not enough to fall back on the old methodological canards about social thought: the sociology textbook tautology that ‘social’ phenomenon and ‘social’ effects exist because they occur between people (Barkawi); the notion that we are always already doing social explanation if our claims are not based on nature, ‘Jesus or Allah’ (Go); or statements such as ‘the international, the political, and the sociological’ are ‘mutually constitutive and hence *by definition* historically imbricated’ (Jabri, emphasis added). Vivienne Jabri is absolutely right that international political sociology is one of the most intellectually productive literatures in IR. It was certainly not singled out for criticism. Indeed, *Economy of Force* makes no mention of the Bigo and Walker article to which Jabri refers. Nonetheless, many international political sociology practitioners inadvertently join social constructivists, the English School, international historical sociologists and others in perpetuating ahistorical invocations of ‘the social’ in lieu of an actual genealogy of distinctly social forms of practice and thought (Owens, forthcoming).

To historicise and denaturalise nineteenth-century social and sociological theories is obviously not to question the secular relational constitution of the human world; to say that trained sociologists never said anything of importance; or to abandon the canon of classical social theory. It is to shed new light on the history of social, sociological and international thought, for example to retrieve the *sozialpolitik* origins of political realism and the structural functionalism behind liberal solidarism. More importantly, it is to show how, with the problematic exception of Marxism, distinctly social theories originally emerged to explain and remedy class and anti-colonial revolts. That is, they were modern forms of *oikonomikos*, the science of domestication. Indeed, symptomatic of the assimilation of household rule into basic ‘political’ and social concepts, the canonical social theorists largely conceived politics as government, as domination, essentially violent, about ruling and being ruled. This is exemplified in Weber’s ‘political realism’, but also in Marx, Durkheim, and a great deal of IR scholarship. Consider Barkawi’s oxymoronic references to ‘household politics’, the words never conjoined in *Economy of Force*, and claim that Vietnamese communists ‘defeated a discourse of the household with a politics of the social’. In fact, the National Liberation Front replaced one despotic household form with another. Refusing to register the underlying political theory questions at stake in the nature of government under counterinsurgency, including the possibility of theorising an alternative politics-as-non-domestication, Barkawi cannot see the ‘difference’ it makes ‘to re-describe modern society and politics as scaled-up, bureaucratically administered households’. But this was also a non-question for Max Weber and Clausewitz.

Centring analysis on the pervasive but also contingent discourses and practices of household administration offers a new basis for theorising politics as the opposite of household management, that is, as constituted through resistance to domestication. Thus Jabri is absolutely right when she says that despotic household rule ‘does not easily lend itself... to the potentiality of the resisting subject’ or ‘enable us to unravel the emergence of the subject of politics’. But this is hardly a critique of *Economy of Force*. It is one of its central assumptions. Indeed, the closing pages sketch an alternative political theory of non-domestication that is precisely and explicitly *not* based on the languages and practices of the household. For Barkawi, this is just ‘speculation’; for Markell, it is theorising that ‘breaks out of the deep argumentative rut in twentieth-century political theory’. The experience of biological necessity, Markell writes, ‘is *not* always already identical to the experience of necessity involved in the compulsion of some people by others: instead, the equation of these two kinds of necessity is the persistent but contingent achievement of discourses and practices of household rule, which exploit the former kind of necessity in order to impose the latter kind’. This seemingly simple insight has radical implications not only for the history and theory of modern society, which naturalises household management, but for theorising a meaningful political alternative.

Drawing on Marx, Jabri rightly asks whether the category of ‘household’ can effectively work at such an abstract level necessary for ‘critique’. This is an important question that the book does not thoroughly address. Rather than consider the historical conditions in which such an abstract category might be conceived, and why liberalism and social theory obscure this, Jabri denies the possibility: ‘the fundamental baseline of critique...’, she writes, ‘does not easily lend itself to despotism’. Overlooking the actual content of household administration in *Economy of Force*, including lengthy analyses of social work at the level of population, Jabri focuses on a narrow concept of ‘despotism’ or ‘rule’, presenting the household as somehow the ‘universal manifestation of rule’, ‘all rule’. Household governance is reduced to a ‘repressive model’ because it is obviously unable to account for the varieties of power articulated through Foucault’s sovereign-discipline-biopolitical triptych. But this is a missed opportunity for a more productive dialogue on how, why, and with what consequence Foucault’s genealogy of ‘population’ conflated ‘household’ with ‘family’, thereby inadvertently supporting liberalism’s foundational myth regarding the destruction of household governance in modern ‘society’ (34-35, 109-111). To borrow Jabri’s words, the household surely is ‘*the* condition of possibility for such [liberal] rationalities’. The founding apologue of liberalism is precisely the disavowal of household rule over self-governing subjects while rationalizing its modern manifestations.

Households are not the universal manifestation of all rule. The concept is limited to relations of governance based on the control of life processes, real bodies that need food, water, and shelter. Indeed, the constitutive feature necessary for any work of conceptual abstraction is precisely the *hierarchical administration of life necessities* (2-4, 7-8, 39-41, 88-91). Thus, if one wanted to pursue them, there are several commonalities between Marx on abstract labour and theorising the social realm as a distinctly modern and universalising form of household. That is, to make sense of the logic of governance under capitalist imperial states we require the abstract notion of household: the administration of life necessities based on hierarchical relations between household members in a particular, though not necessarily fixed, spatial arrangement. Indeed,

omitting co-residence and fixed location from the household concept, making co-residence a contingent rather than a fundamental feature, allows us to examine precisely how and why co-residence is present in some contexts, but not others, as Markell illuminates through the writings of Aristotle, Marx, and Arendt. The alternative implies a radical distinction between states and empires, to re-inscribe the nation-state ontology into political theory. This is obviously not to suggest that households explain all 'the complexities of the international', let alone reduce the wars in Iraq to 'armed social work' or the 'ontology of household rule' (Jabri).

Economy of Force now has a life of its own. The book is not perfect and I must accept responsibility for its flaws, as well as the generous praise. Reading the four commentaries, I have not been fully clear about the basis of the homology between different household forms; the relation between social theory and counterinsurgency practice; or engaged fully with the postcolonial literatures to which several core arguments are indebted. New and productive avenues for further work have also been suggested, including on how to theorise the contingencies of co-residence and fixed location, on abstraction, and how to better historicise and theorise subaltern agency. Yet, for now at least, I remain convinced of the basic claims, that existing literatures are inadequate to the task of theorising some of the most persistent forms of counterinsurgency governance; that international and political theory needs to do better at historicising social and sociological theories against the backdrop of the rise and violent transformations of the social realm; that this, in turn, sheds new light on the history of international thought; and that in these tasks we could do worse than look again - and even fully retrieve - the rich history and theory of household administration.

References

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